

***Knights of Justice:  
Blockbuster Terrorism in Code Geass: Lelouch of the Revolution***

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Synopsis

*Code Geass* (Taniguchi 2006-08) is an epic-length Japanese *anime* that forms the center of a multimedia franchise. It focuses on a heroic terrorist's efforts to free Japan from colonial occupation, and references real-world events such as the 1995 sarin gas attack in Tokyo. Yet, *Code Geass* treats these plot elements in a cursory fashion, interweaving them with situations which include absurdly giant *mecha* robots and high school romantic comedy. Thus this paper argues that *Code Geass* represents "blockbuster terrorism", symptomatic of how the popular media oversimplifies the complex political issue of terrorism for commercial reasons.

Biographies

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Essay

The only ones who should kill are those who are prepared to be killed! Wherever oppressors act to abuse their power by attacking the powerless, we shall appear again! No matter how mighty, how formidable our foe may be! Those of you with power — fear us! Those of you without it — rally behind us! We, the Black Knights, shall be the ones who stand in judgment of this world! (Taniguchi n.p.)

This is the manifesto of the hero of *Code Geass: Lelouch of the Rebellion* (henceforth simply *Code Geass*, Taniguchi 2006-08), an epic *anime* series that forms the centerpiece of a multimedia franchise. The hero, Lelouch, is a high-school student in an alternate near-future Japan that has been conquered by the Holy Britannian Empire, a fictional imperialist analog of the British Empire. Lelouch leads a double life as the masked terrorist "Zero", fighting to liberate Japan through violent and spectacular attacks against the colonial authorities. Following its debut in 2006, *Code Geass* quickly gained international popularity and critical acclaim, with popular reviewers praising its sophisticated philosophical conflict. The series has been broadcast internationally, and

was shown in the United States on Cartoon Network's Adult Swim channel. By November 2008, *Code Geass* had sold over one million *anime* DVDs and Blu-Rays in various countries, making it one of the world's most popular animated programs (Carothers n.p.). The series has spawned related stories and retellings in the form of *manga*, novels, and video games, as well as a vast array of merchandise. A third season of the *anime* was announced in August 2011.

Why has *Code Geass*, with its central conceit of “terrorist as hero,” been able to command this degree of popular and critical acclaim? What is it saying to its audiences about terrorism, and why is it taking this stance? In order to answer these questions, this paper provides a multi-part answer. It first reads *Code Geass*’s fictional portrayal of terrorism in relation to post-9/11 scholarly perspectives on “new terrorism” and asymmetric warfare. Then it further analyzes *Code Geass* against Jean-Francois Lyotard’s theory of eclectic “little narratives,” and finally as a cultural artifact within a global media market dominated by the ethos of the Hollywood blockbuster franchise. This paper finds that *Code Geass* intentionally rejects the present orthodoxy regarding terrorism and authority. Instead of portraying a frightening religious fanatic that defies rational understanding, *Code Geass* depicts a terrorist with sympathetic motives that audiences can comprehend, a comforting fantasy amidst a political climate dominated by constant risk and uncertainty. In addition, *Code Geass* presents a disenfranchised role model who is able to rise up successfully against a repressive state apparatus. This false and pleasing fantasy of individual empowerment defies status quo conceptions of the government as the only legitimate authority in society, satisfying consumers who are increasingly suspicious of such metanarratives. But despite such countercultural claims, *Code Geass* remains a commercial popular media franchise. *Code Geass* is a non-Western text and an episodic television series rather than a film, but it nonetheless follows the model of the post-millennial Hollywood blockbuster. This paper ultimately argues that *Code Geass*’s use of terrorism as a theme merely exploits the post-9/11 *zeitgeist* in order to make itself appear sophisticated and relevant, maximizing its appeal to audiences. *Code Geass* thus represents what this paper terms “blockbuster terrorism,” symptomatic of how popular media oversimplifies the complex political issue of terrorism for profitable consumption across a wide spectrum of audiences.

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### **Only a Certain Amount of Terror**

According to Paul Virilio, terrorism and war are intrinsically acts of spectacle, the aim is “not so much to capture as to ‘captivate’ [the enemy], to instil the fear of death into him before he actually dies” (1). But Virilio subsequently notes that terrorism is the dark cousin of war, and a “psychic anaesthesia” (33) accordingly pervades acts of terror despite the proliferation of war-related media. “Man can only take a certain amount of terror,” Virilio writes, describing how victims mentally block out realities that are too horrifying to them (33). James Chapman, accordingly, notes that war films are caught between a “desire to capture authentic images of the war and the tendency to aestheticize war through aspects of film form and style” (12). This tension gives rise to a “pleasure culture of war,” where war is romantically re-presented as a *Boys’ Own*-style

adventure story of heroes and villains (Chapman 4). In a roughly similar vein, the “war on terror” is also portrayed in a romanticized and aesthetically pleasing fashion in popular media. *V for Vendetta* (McTeigue 2006) features balletic “bullet-time” duels between a masked insurgent and the security forces of a totalitarian dystopia. *Gundam 00* (Mizushima 2007-9) is an *anime* series with soap-opera-like personal revelations. The hero, a former terrorist, dramatically discovers that he caused the death of a friend’s family in one of his past attacks.

Yet despite these similarities, post-millennial representations of the “war on terror” are nonetheless distinct from their closely-linked antecedent of the war epic. War films ultimately look back on history; the genre is “dominated, unsurprisingly, by films about the two World Wars” (Chapman 248). But where war films dwell on the past, popular entertainment about terrorism looks at the present or future, reflecting real-life anxieties over when the next terrorist attack will inevitably occur. Thus popular media portrayals of terrorism are inextricably products of an era overshadowed by the specter of 9/11.

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### **Another Man’s Freedom Fighter**

In this context, it is significant that *Code Geass* portrays its hero as a romanticized revolutionary, a Che Guevara or Yasser Arafat figure rather than an Osama Bin Laden or Anders Behring Breivik. These men have all been referred to as terrorists, but individuals such as the former pair are generally viewed more favorably than the latter. Terrorism is a highly contested concept, and there is no universally agreed definition of what constitutes a terrorist (Byford 34). But since 9/11, many theorists have drawn a distinction between “old terrorists” and the “new terrorists” that are said to exist today (Martin 5-8). Old or traditional terrorists fit the maxim of one man’s terrorist being another man’s freedom fighter. In Ireland, terrorism “made heroes out of gunmen [and] policemen into villains” (Fromkin 686-687). Similarly, Alan Dershowitz notes “the very brutality and desperation” (31) of acts committed by the Palestinian people in the 1960s and 1970s gave them greater international legitimacy. Acts of violence committed by a clearly defined group with explicit grievances against the state are often viewed with some sympathy by observers outside the conflict zone, especially since such violence rarely spills beyond national borders (Martin 5-8).

New terrorists are a different breed. Since 9/11, attention has been drawn to a vast and nebulous global network of belligerents possessing politically vague or even mystical motivations. Most disturbingly, their violence is not confined to a far-flung corner of the globe, but is everywhere and indiscriminate, seemingly aimed at the destruction of society and the elimination of large sections of the population (Weinberg 47). However, *Code Geass* does not glorify a new terrorist. Instead, it sites its protagonist firmly within a traditional emancipatory context. Although he is referred to as a terrorist, Lelouch’s terrorism is aimed at freeing a people from colonial domination. *Code Geass* thus fits within Virilio and Chapman’s conceptions of aestheticized violence, evoking the trappings of terrorism, but presenting a terrorist that does not unsettle audiences.

## A Bad Kind of Body Language

This trend towards aestheticized violence is evident within the first few episodes of *Code Geass*. In Lelouch's debut appearance as the masked terrorist Zero, he threatens to release poison gas on a crowd of civilians. The sequence is intended to evoke the 1995 Aum Shinrikyo sarin gas attack in Tokyo, an especially powerful image for Japanese audiences. But Lelouch's gas turns out to be harmless colored smoke, a distraction so he can rescue a friend from military custody. Throughout the series, Lelouch takes pains to avoid harming noncombatants. The first time civilians die from his plots, Lelouch is struck by remorse. *Code Geass* belabors the point by making this a personal tragedy for Lelouch; the father of his love interest is among the victims. *Code Geass* thus presents a terrorist whose attitudes towards violence essentially mirror the liberal postmodern sensibilities of audiences. According to Christopher Coker, killing "is not only an action, but also a speech act. It involves signs, gestures, and expressions...a body language, if you like, aimed at other bodies" (115). A society's cultural norms and morals define how violence is conducted, giving rise to different "grammars of killing". In liberal postmodern society, the use of violence is constrained by moral imperatives to minimize suffering. Soldiers are expected to avoid civilian casualties and undue acts of cruelty (Coker 14).

Terrorists have a different grammar of killing. It was once said that terrorists want "a lot of people watching, not a lot of people dead" (Weinberg 47). But the past decade has proven that some terrorists are willing to perform indiscriminate slaughter in the name of religious authorities. Objectively, the number of deaths caused by even the largest terrorist attacks do not compare to deaths from natural disasters. But such incidents can be seen as random occurrences, while a terrorist attack is a deliberate act of malevolent agency and thus far more disturbing. Terrorist attacks are intended to create a sense of vulnerability and helplessness, causing both physical and long-term psychological trauma (Ditzler 187-206). For instance, survivors of suicide bombings may develop bumps beneath their skin months after the attack, as DeLillo describes:

...this is caused by...tiny fragments of the suicide bomber's body.  
The bomber is blown to bits, literally bits and pieces, and fragments  
of flesh and bone come flying outward with such force and velocity  
that they get wedged...in the body of anyone who's in striking  
range...They call this organic shrapnel. (6)

In Iraq, insurgents have created a new form of media spectacle, releasing videos depicting grotesque beheadings of their captives. A beheading is a humiliating mutilation of the body, showing it to be penetrable, reducing it to a mass of abject and base effluvia. Postmodern culture values the sanctity of the individual, and perhaps, by extension, also the inviolability of the body. Fitness, health, and physical well-being have become prime foci of social concern. But actors living outside the postmodern experience have very different opinions. It is likely that the perpetrators of such acts are

quite aware their target audiences would find such footage unthinkableably barbaric; they deliberately attack such sensibilities (Coker 122).

Genuine terrorist attacks are therefore far removed from the sanitized depictions of violence in *Code Geass*. While people die in *Code Geass*, most victims are a faceless mass with no names or distinct identities, anonymous to the viewer. The resulting corpses are also depicted as intact bodies without any disfigurement, calculated to elicit tears as opposed to disgust. The only indicator that the victims are dead is the copious presence of exaggeratedly red blood on the surface of their image-bodies. These are deliberate stylistic choices; the lack of gore in *Code Geass* is in line with the series's nature as an entertainment property meant for mass distribution. Television requires its own grammar of killing, an aesthetically pleasing violence that does not disturb the viewer, but rather pleasantly captivates him with stylized imagery.

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## Post-Heroic Warfare

Much in the same way *Code Geass* gives an oversimplified view of bloodshed, it also conflates the full spectrum of political violence into a single absurd narrative. Lelouch and his followers are initially a poorly-armed ragtag group. But by the end of the series, the Black Knights are a uniformed military force, able to challenge the state's armed forces on equal terms. This is a supremely unrealistic progression. In the real world, terrorism is not necessarily synonymous with revolutionary war or guerrilla warfare (Martin 21-31; Lacquer 26). There have been high-profile incidents where terrorist gunmen have engaged security forces directly, such as the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Yet even in Mumbai, the gunmen did not follow military rules of engagement, deliberately targeting civilians. Terrorists do not fight like soldiers. Most contemporary terrorist groups are organized as loose networks of cells, a structure intended to evade capture by state authorities. Terrorism is a weapon of the weak, a form of asymmetric combat used by those unable to challenge the state on its own terms (Gray 5-14).

Small armed groups have historically been able to eject perceived foreign invaders or colonial occupier from their territory, but such victories have generally not come due to strength of arms. In such cases, state authorities have typically given in to demands for autonomy only after a prolonged period, when the conflict became too drawn-out or costly to sustain. A protracted civil conflict erodes domestic support and damages morale within the state's armed forces, as was the case for the French in Algeria (Fromkin 686-91). Arguably, insurgents in Iraq and Afghanistan are attempting to weaken the resolve of the US and its allies in a similar fashion (Cordesman 2-6). However, this form of civil conflict is not the kind shown in *Code Geass*. When Lelouch and his followers vanquish their enemies, they do so in the most literal manner possible, defeating them decisively on the battlefield in honorable combat.

Although *Code Geass* refers to its hero as a terrorist, by the end of the series he effectively leads a conventional army. Throughout *Code Geass*, Lelouch and his allies emerge victorious against government forces not only through superior tactics, but also

through superior technology, engaging in an arms race with their foes. The tendency to reduce victory in battle to a matter of relative technological capability is not exclusive to popular media. The 1990s saw a vast body of literature lauding the miracles of military technology in winning wars, the “Revolution in Military Affairs” (Rasmussen 43-90). But scholars and practitioners today recognize that superior technology is not a panacea, especially when one's enemy is a non-state actor rather than another military. Real-world terrorists rarely attack a state's armed forces directly, instead concentrating on civilian “soft targets”. Terrorism renders the technological and operational advantages possessed by a state's military largely irrelevant (Gray 5-14).

However, popular media depictions such as *Code Geass* remain rooted in fetishism of military technology, portraying confrontations with terrorists as clashes on the battlefield. In the world of *Code Geass*, giant robots or *mecha* have become the dominant weapons of war, rendering tanks and infantry obsolete. These machines are called Knightmares, deliberately evoking the medieval adventure-romance. Lelouch pilots the Gawain Knightmare, and other named *mecha* include the Lancelot and the Siegfried. Most of the cast are Knightmare pilots, and characters resolve battles through heroic one-on-one duels. *Code Geass* manages to portray single combat in a manner that satisfies the contemporary aversion towards harm befalling the individual: Knightmare pilots in *Code Geass* are safely encased in the cockpits of their high-tech titans. There is little bloodshed, and pilots frequently eject upon defeat rather than being killed.

Such conventions are typical of the *mecha* genre, but the presence of *mecha* combat in a series purportedly about serious political themes is particularly problematic. In *Code Geass* combat is a heroic act, but in the real world, glory on the battlefield is rapidly becoming an archaic concept. Edward Luttwak argues that contemporary society is in fact moving towards a form of post-heroic warfare, in line with how people in the postmodern context are adverse to taking risks as individuals. Since the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the claim of *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* has been increasingly challenged. Soldiers who die in service to the state may still be honored as heroes, but they are increasingly seen as victims as well (Luttwak 109-22). The family of a fallen soldier may well hail his personal sacrifice while simultaneously vilifying the government whose foreign policy sent him into battle. In an age where real-world soldiers may be less than convinced that their leaders have the legitimate authority to order them into battle, *Code Geass* paints a comforting caricature where combatants are either unwitting pawns of a literal evil empire, or righteous individualists fighting to overthrow an unjust state apparatus.

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## A New Age of Heroes

This skepticism towards government bodies and the concurrent celebration of the individual evokes Jean-Francois Lyotard's comment that the current postmodern age is one typified by an “incredulity towards metanarratives” (xxiv). For Lyotard, “the old poles of attraction” represented by grand overarching stories — of church, of state, of heroes of contemporary history, of “truth” — are losing their appeal, and “it does not look as

though they will be replaced, at least not on their former scale” (14). These metanarratives once functioned as a means through which a culture masked its own inherent contradictions and instabilities, thus reifying the social order. But the postmodern condition is one of incredulity towards metanarratives. Instead, “little narratives” are increasingly favored, “stories that explain small practices, local events, rather than large scale universal or global concepts... [little narratives are] situational, provisional, contingent, temporary and make no claim to universality, truth, reason or stability” (Klages 169).

Daya Thussu claims news reports after 9/11 serve to circulate metanarratives about terrorism, in an attempt to legitimize the US-led “war on terror.” Thussu argues news media has made audiences accept the image of the mad Muslim terrorist, “a turbaned, bearded...gun-wielding Osama bin Laden, fit[ting] the image of a villain in popular Western imagination” (10). Much in the way Muslims receive disproportionate attention, non-state terrorist groups also receive maximum opprobrium, while state terrorism is ignored. Thussu further posits that the news media spreads the myth of American morality; that US conceptions of democracy and human rights should be adopted across the globe (12-13).

However, while Thussu believes such myths are fully accepted by consumers, Virilio contends that the news media has long since “lost their neutrality” (23) in the eyes of viewers. As of September 11, 2011, one of the top search results for “terrorist” on the video-sharing website Youtube is not a news report but “Terrorist Bloopers”, a home video which presents terrorists as bathetic objects of ridicule. Thussu implies that terrorists are exclusively characterized in the public imagination as turbaned Muslims, but the video’s top-rated user comment instead claims “most terrorists wear thousand dollars suits and hold the highest seats in our government [sic]” (POYKPAC n.p.). The ability of the news media to influence opinions may thus be greatly exaggerated.

As a post-9/11 text, *Code Geass* works within this climate of popular skepticism, presenting a constant and explicit renunciation of metanarratives regarding terrorism. It presents a little narrative of the terrorist as an appealingly understandable avenging hero-figure. Lelouch is an individual with the ability to influence society and rival governments, able to control his own destiny by opposing state forces. He is not a bearded Arab, but instead a Caucasian youth drawn in the fashion of East Asian characters, appealing ethnicities within the global marketplace of *anime* fans. Rather than religious or insane, he is prefigured as a rational chessmaster. Finally, the idea that moral authority lies only with the state is disavowed in *Code Geass*; the government uses massacres and nuclear weapons to put down resistance. The subsequent retaliatory attacks of Lelouch and his Black Knights are cast as heroic endeavors.

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## Something for Everyone

The “Massacre of the Elevens” major plot arc towards the end of *Code Geass*’s first season most strikingly epitomizes *Code Geass*’s disengagement from news media

metanarratives. In Episode 22, a Britannian princess orders the massacre of Japanese civilians. The princess's aide orders the on-site news crew to "cut the mikes and cameras, NOW!" (Taniguchi n.p.). In response, Lelouch's Black Knights hijack the feed to show the atrocity over live television and the Internet, aware that the state will be able to "cut off the broadcast any minute now" (Taniguchi n.p.). As a result, riots break out all over Japan. The state is thus represented as untrustworthy and genocidal maniacs in "thousands dollars suits, [sic]" (POYKPAC n.p.) all too willing to censor unwelcome information, while conventional news outlets are represented as the state's running dogs. *Code Geass* thus posits that it is only through the valiant efforts of terrorists can the abuses of the state (and its apparatus) be exposed, and justice properly served.

The visual grammar of the scene encourages *Code Geass*'s audiences to adopt this disengagement. Long shots drawn at crowd level align audiences with their on-screen counterparts, viewers across Japan, who are confused and aghast at the images of wholesale carnage. When the scene shifts to the site of the massacre proper, this alignment is made more immediate. Audiences see close shots of wounded and dying civilians looking up to the camera, pitifully beseeching Lelouch to help them for he is "the Messiah of Japan ...[their] only hope" (Taniguchi n.p.).

Yet such disengagement belies the fact that *Code Geass* was prefigured as a markedly commercial product-franchise. *Code Geass*'s narratives feature stock characters from disparate popular *anime* genres. Its terrorist-hero exists alongside European witches, *samurai*, knights, short-skirted schoolgirls, and animal mascots. All these characters further interact with one another in archetypal *anime* situations ranging from duels on war-torn battlefields to romantic comedies in a high school classroom. Additionally, in an industry where visual spectacle is a key locus of pleasure for audiences, it is telling that the artist group CLAMP was contracted to design *Code Geass*'s characters. CLAMP is known for titles which have cross-gender appeal, depicting handsome men drawn in the flowing, ethereal art style of *shojo* (lit. "young women," intended for female audiences) engaging in the kind of violence associated with *shonen* (lit. "young men") *manga*. That *Code Geass* is filled with slender young men (e.g. Lelouch) and with female characters who are either buxom pinups or Lolita-esque waifs suggests that its producers are tapping on CLAMP's successful track record of cross-gender visual appeal to attract disparate audiences. CLAMP artist Ageha Okawa acknowledges Lelouch was created to be a character which would appeal to "everyone," and that *Code Geass* likewise was envisioned as a "hit" show that would similarly appeal to "everyone" (Newtype 46). These are ideologies of commercialization and enjoyable spectacle which the producers of *Code Geass* quite literally encourage their audiences to buy into in the form of supplementary merchandise. These ideologies are far removed from the values of countercultural rebellion that the *anime*'s narratives espouse.

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## The White Knight

At the same time, the manner in which *Code Geass*'s producers position the text within the larger intertextual network of *anime* is also significant. *Code Geass* is often



compared to the influential *Gundam* franchise. The *Gundam* franchise has endured for over three decades, and is popular worldwide. Its eponymous *mecha* are iconic not only within the giant robot genre, but also within the larger sphere of Japanese pop culture. For most audiences of *anime*, the *mecha* in *Gundam* stand for a particular and complex regime of heroism; the series is widely hailed as one of the first *anime* franchises to address themes of war and violence. Thus the *Gundam* franchise essentially provides a metanarrative regarding heroism within *anime*. The presence of *mecha* in *Code Geass* draws immediate comparison to *Gundam*, especially since the Knightmare units in *Code Geass* evince a visual and presentational similarity to *Gundam mecha*.

The Lancelot Knightmare, for example, features a bright and predominantly white color scheme, exaggerated weapons and shoulder armor, and a toyetic capability for baroque upgrades which manifests in the form of glowing angel wings. This draws upon the visual design conventions of *mecha* piloted by the heroes of over twenty iterations of the *Gundam* franchise. Further, both the Lancelot and the Gundam are presented as objects of spectacle. Beyond the lengthy fight scenes these *mecha* engage in, even their pre-fight “power up” sequences fetishize them appealingly. A typical “power up” sequence in *Code Geass* features the pre-deployment Lancelot posing dramatically directly towards the camera. This camera then essays lavishly animated pans and zooms onto various parts of the Lancelot's body as it whirrs into operation. The “power up” sequence climaxes with an explosive display of the Lancelot's power. It either fires its gun, or unfurls its wings, or blasts its jets. All this is set to increasingly high-tempo heroic music, and a verbal countdown which anticipates the Lancelot operating at full power. The Lancelot's pilot, similarly, epitomizes the *Gundam* franchise's conception of a hero. He is brave, capable, and loyal, yet secretly troubled by a dark past.

All of these intertextual references — the visual and the presentational — are particularly powerful, when one considers that in *Code Geass* the Lancelot is an *antagonist*. It is a creation of the Britannian Empire, and its *Gundam* pilot analog is Lelouch's rival and dramatic foil. The *mecha* which Lelouch and his followers use are, in contrast, squat, dark, and comparatively primitive. Their vaguely sinister appearance evokes the disposable mass-produced generic bad-guy *mecha* that the hero-pilots of *Gundam* effortlessly cut down by the hundreds. Thus the Lancelot's spectacular deployment on the battlefield ups the dramatic tension of the scenes for audiences with even a passing familiarity with *anime*: it seemingly presents insurmountable odds for Lelouch to overcome. But Lelouch often manages to defeat the Lancelot, despite his disadvantaged position, through the use of cunning tactics and planning. The dominant markers of pleasure and identification in anime are thus deliberately relocated in *Code Geass*. The Lancelot/Gundam might be a weapon of unmatched physical power, but Lelouch is repeatedly able to play its pilot, a *Gundam* analogue, for a fool. This is rhetoric which positively differentiates *Code Geass* from the overarching *Gundam* metanarrative-franchise and iconography that *Code Geass* operates within. If *Gundam* is supposed to be complex, *Code Geass* is complexer.

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## Blockbuster Terrorism

Lyotard would have found *Code Geass*'s doubled disengagement with metanarratives familiar. For him, the deployment of pastiche and iconoclasm within a contemporary text affords its producers a profitable advantage:

Eclecticism is the degree zero of contemporary general culture: one listens to reggae, watches a western, eats McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and "retro" clothes in Hong Kong ...It is easy to find a public for eclectic works. ...But this realism of the "anything goes" is in fact that of money ...Such realism accommodates all tendencies, just as capital accommodates all "needs", providing that the tendencies and needs have purchasing power. (Lyotard 76)

While Lyotard was writing in the late 1970s, his findings anticipate Thomas Schatz's research on the structural qualities of the post-millennial Hollywood blockbuster. Schatz finds that with each passing year since the 1990s, "[Hollywood's] compulsive pursuit of franchise-spawning blockbusters has become more acute, and more successful" (25). As such, in post-millennial Hollywood, the term "blockbuster" has become synonymous with a commercially successful film which is the center of a multimedia event designed to market a wide variety of thematically related products to widely different audiences. In a hyper-fragmented global media marketplace, blockbuster film franchises now push classical genre conventions to absurd lengths, overtly incorporating elements from other genres, targeting mass audiences as opposed to niche ones. These blockbusters are spectacular serial narratives about the adventures of an iconoclastic male hero-figure, invariably featuring stylized PG-13 action sequences. Their storyworlds sacrifice theoretical depth for narrative complexity, so much so that a single film cannot resolve all plot threads. Supporting characters, consequently, can be profitably deployed to appear in "spin-off" supplementary texts even after the iconoclast-hero fights his way to a "happy ending" (Schatz 32-3).

While *Code Geass* is a Japanese *anime*, it nonetheless exemplifies these blockbuster franchise conventions, combining elements of comedy and teenage romance with ostensibly political themes and stylized violence. It further centers these themes around a "terrorist" hero. Its sequels and spin-offs also focus on fleshing out its world. Despite Lelouch's resounding victory at the *anime*'s end, Lelouch's sister stars in an ongoing *manga* series. The forthcoming third season of the *anime* will be set during the events of the previous one, introducing new characters who will adventure on a different continent.

In conclusion, the post 9/11 era has seen the plot device of terrorism gaining newfound prominence as another narrative thread within the spectacular and generically hybrid narratives of popular media such as *Code Geass*. This producer strategy thus tenuously links these texts with a regime of relevance and sophistication, with an apparently engaged address of pressing contemporary concerns, and often with the ethos of skepticism that characterize the age. The present era is one where the specter of terrorism dominates daily life, with the next terrorist attack ever-looming over the

horizon. Yet paradoxically, at the same time many living in this climate of perpetual terror do not have an informed understanding of terrorism. For those who do not engage with academic discourse or even the news media, popular entertainment media depictions may well shape opinions regarding terrorism and related political issues.

*Code Geass* is an example of a multimedia franchise often characterized by its audiences as complex and sophisticated in its handling of political themes. But the overriding intent of texts like *Code Geass* is still to entertain rather than inform, meaning that their treatment of terrorism is stereotypical and at best cursory. This oversimplification of the complex political issue of terrorism for profitable consumption across a wide spectrum of audiences is what can be termed “blockbuster terrorism”: Texts which operate in this mode invoke the iconography and plot device of terrorism for calculatedly commercial purposes. They are visually spectacular, generically hybrid, and have an appealing veneer of irreverent sophistication about them. But for all their sound and fury, these texts ultimately end up saying nothing worthwhile about terrorism at all.

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